# Americans All On Screen:

## From December 7 to September 11

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## I

"What then is the American, this new man?" asked J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur in a primal passage from *Letters From an American Farmer* (1782), answering his own question with a melting pot vision of democracy and equality. "He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world."[1] Like all vital traditions, America's myth of democracy and equality endures, first, because it has cultural resonance for a nation that has, by and large, met Crèvecoeur's expectations; and second, because it is carefully preserved and ritually performed. In the age of the moving image, the generous embrace of Hollywood cinema has expressed the best hopes of the American experiment in self-government and the dream—often deferred, never surrendered—of equality.

It is a matter of no little irony, not to say embarrassment, that the first great feature film in the American motion picture tradition was D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a fierce celebration of inequality. Enthusiastically blurbed by no less a film critic than President Woodrow Wilson, the "history written in lighting" told a sinister, revisionist version of the Civil War and Reconstruction, wherein a heroic Ku Klux Klan rode to the rescue of Southern democracy and virginal womanhood alike. Griffith's Confederate hallucination ranks as the most notorious rendering of a conventional attitude towards American race relations. In film,

[1] J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer*, 1782, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym et al., vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 1989) 558-82; 561.

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as in American life, African Americans were the conspicuous exception to the national ethos of fair dealing and open admission: demeaned, demonized, and erased from the American pageant. Just as Jim Crow segregated African Americans in the nation's theaters, Hollywood restricted ten percent of the population to segregated screen space. Always, however, the main rule was not so much offensive stereotypes as pervasive invisibility. Whole genres and film cycles in the classical Hollywood canon may unspool without not so much as a glimpse of a black face. Another touchstone depiction of the Civil War, *Gone With the Wind* (1939), is of a kind in its matter-of-fact subjugation of the servant class: neutered men and bovine women, faithful retainers and squealing incompetents.

Other shades of Americans found the screen a more tolerant and open-minded medium. *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the epochal first sound film, was as much an assimilationist as a technological landmark. In America, a Jewish kid from the Lower East Side could transform himself from a *schlemiel* named Jacob Rabinowitz into a Broadway superstar named Jack Robin. Bantering with Yiddish vernacular in the intertitles, *The Jazz Singer* taught that ethnic immigrants could have it both ways—living the American dream while still getting to sing the Kol Nidre in synagogue. Toss off "the feudal and the old" and embrace the "democratic and modern," Walt Whitman had demanded of his fellow artists a generation earlier in *Democratic Vistas* (1871).[2]

The theatrical space of the motion picture venue itself, from peep show to nickelodeon to an evening's entertainment in an ornate motion picture palace, traces the upward mobility of the movies as an art form: from an urban, working-class vice indulged in by immigrants to a respectable, middle-class diversion. Spreading wide its social glue, Hollywood configured its ideal audience as a broad, undifferentiated public, a family of man comprised of all ages, classes, and ethnicities. At the same time, however, the star system held rigidly to an anti-democratic caste prejudice, a hierarchy of royalty in which some screen faces were born to the medium. The shimmering close up is the best way to tell who is validated, and before the camera lens, all men, and especially women, are not created equal.

Mainly though, both in front of and behind the screen, the Hollywood melting pot stirred up a creative mix of exotic ingredients: German directors, Swedish screen goddesses, Italian gangsters, brawling Irishmen, Jewish wisecrackers, Latin lovers, and sidekicks of Asian, African, and Native American lineage. After 1934, the rigorous enforcement of the Production Code leavened out the promiscuous interbreeding that had invigorated the silent and early sound era: the Production Code's injunction for "respectful treatment" of "national feelings" often meant ignoring the swarthiest of hyphenated Americans. Still, if Anglo-American surnames and chiseled North European features got the best lines and most flattering close-ups, Hollywood made room for its own not-so-huddled masses: accented bit players, character actors, and against-the-grain stars, usually at Warner Bros., the gritty

[2] Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 1871, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym et al., vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 1989) 2095-98; 2097.

"working class studio" built on the backs of Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, Paul Muni, and Bette Davis in films such as Little Caesar (1930), The Public Enemy (1931), *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), and *Dangerous* (1935), respectively.

Hollywood delivered its lessons in American civics most sternly in the "great man" biopics of the 1930s and 1940s, a genre of high seriousness and big budgets, featuring an Olympian pantheon of Founding Fathers, military leaders, and great scientists. So glorious was the stature of certain Americans that their exemplary lives were uncontainable in a single feature film: we thus have *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *Abe Lincoln of Illinois* (1940), or *Young Tom Edison* (1940) and *Edison the Man* (1940). Moreover, the biopic genre was supple enough to turn likely foreigners of sufficient independence of mind into honorary American character types in *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940). Sometimes too, though constrained by both political expediency and the Production Code, a few didactic and ideologically charged films managed to admit that, the New Deal notwithstanding, discontent and injustice existed in Great Depression America. The compromised genre of Hollywood "social consciousness" in the 1930s included preachments against unfair labor conditions (*Black Fury*, 1936), lynching *(Fury*, 1936), and ethnic (though not racial) intolerance (*Black Legion*, 1936).

## II

World War II changed everything. The egalitarian ethos and unifying requirements of wartime mobilization meant a marshalling of all Americans under the banner of "Americans All." The Warner Bros. platoon offers perhaps the most enduring tableaux of the American melting pot, a multicultural unit of average guys, from different regions, with different skills, working and fighting shoulder to shoulder against a pureblooded race of Aryans and Sons of Heaven. In *Bataan* (1943), *Air Force* (1943), *Guadalcanal Diary* (1944), and *The Purple Heart* (1944), the War Department seemed to issue American ethnicities with demographic precision, one type per platoon: Brooklyn Jews, Italian-American Romeos, Iowa farm boys, Boston Irishmen, crusty old-timers nicknamed "Pops," and the lone wolf recalcitrant who by the end reel died for his buddies and the Allied cause. Office of War Information and official military propaganda told the same story, most notably in Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1942-1945), a seven-part guidebook in American democracy and equality that opens and closes with the pealing of the Liberty Bell. Perhaps the biggest break with the black-and-white past on film was the Capra's *The Negro Soldier* (1944), a forthright avowal of racial equality given the stamp of government approval.

The promulgation of American values during wartime had a not totally unintended consequence. Lofty rhetoric beamed at the self-styled 'master races' of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan boomeranged back to native shores, forcing a confrontation with the regional contradictions to an egalitarian ethos that looked so good on screen. First in the

wartime film, where divisive antagonism was of necessity put on hold for the duration, and then in the postwar social problem film, where for the first time the exceptions to equality were addressed bluntly, if often tendentiously, on the American screen, Hollywood began practicing what it preached. In affirming a myth that was still not a reality, the postwar social problem film showcased the domestic aberrations and submitted the obvious solution. Of course, by the time Hollywood articulated the answer to the social problem, most Americans were primed to listen to the lessons in tolerance for the disabled (*The Best Years of Our Lives*, 1946; *The Men*, 1950), Jews (*Crossfire*, 1947; *Gentlemen's Agreement*, 1947), and African Americans (*Pinky*, 1949; *Home of the Brave*, 1949; *No Way Out*, 1950). *Bright Victory* (1951) exemplifies several of the core elements and best impulses: a white Southerner and a black Southerner, each blinded in combat, become fast friends during convalescence, the blinded white man ultimately opening his eyes to the equality of the black man.

With the crack-up of the Hollywood studio system in the 1950s, new space opened up for independent and hence independent-minded productions. Prodded by competition from television, challenged by Italian neo-realism and the French New Wave, and abetted by the slackening of Production Code censorship, American cinema turned away from the myth of mere entertainment to engage subject matters that the first generation of studio moguls had studiously avoided: downbeat melodrama, political controversy, and noirish fatalism.

During the Cold War, American culture tended to define itself by its antagonist: to conjure the Soviet menace was to affirm its opposite. The terror of the antidemocratic alternative surfaced with hysterical force in the anticommunist cycle bracketed by *The Red Menace* (1948) and *Big Jim McLain* (1952)—melodramas of subversion whose contempt for due process and constitutional niceties oozed from every frame. In the science fiction film, the same forebodings arose in a series of more compelling and longer-lived allegories of extraterrestrial invasion and attack. Acting out fantasies of national insecurity whose real meaning was transparent even at the time, alien death rays obliterated Washington, DC, in *Earth VS The Flying Saucers* (1956), and flying insects battled the U.S. Air Force in *The Deadly Mantis* (1957). Closer to home, the subversive suspicion that equality was conformity, freedom a chimera in a consumer society, was captured in the title of the most evocative political allegory of the Cold War: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Vegetable "pod people" take over the souls of the citizens of a small American community although to all outward appearances the town remains the same. Yet some of the best evidence of a sustaining faith in America as the last, best hope of mankind came in the films that claimed to fear for its survival. *A Face in the Crowd* (1957), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), and *Seven Days in May* (1964) condemned homegrown demagogues and internal threats that, like Senator Joseph McCarthy himself, were exposed by television and defeated by good men doing the right thing. With suggestive timing, the connection was underscored in Emile de Antonio's landmark documentary *Point of Order!* (1963), a deft compilation of kinescope clips from the Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954.

The civil rights movement that galvanized America from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s arrived in Hollywood most notably in the gradual admission of African-Americans into less separate and more equal screen space. The power to engender identification, to make one person the same size as another, and to frame the world from the perspective of an outcast character makes film an apt medium for color-coded lessons in equality. *The Defiant Ones* (1958) featured an exemplary cinematic epiphany: a girl being rescued by Sidney Poitier sees the black man looming over her, and the spectator adopts her racist vision, though not he but his white partner is the true threat. In fact, race was but one of many prejudices being cast off on screen. *Funny Girl* (1966) and *The Graduate* (1967) showcased faces that in an earlier decade would have been relegated to sidekick status and rhinoplasty.

Ironically, as the Hollywood screen was becoming more tolerant, television was usurping its cultural centrality. One result was the fragmentation of the mass audience for motion pictures into segmented and specialized tastes—art house cinema, teenpics, blaxploitation, chick flicks, and so on. The noisiest and most numerous slice of the new motion picture demographic was the baby boomer-bred counter culture of the 1960s, whose obvious landmark was *Easy Rider* (1969), a western on motorcycles that, for all its alleged radicalism, held on firmly to the traditional verities: getting back to the land, lighting out for the territory, and pursuing happiness. "This used to be a helluva country," laments a patriotic dropout (played by Jack Nicholson) during a moment of clarity in the marijuana haze.

By the mid-1970s, in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, overtly political filmmaking such as *The Parallax View* (1974) and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) came to see American democracy as an underhanded conspiracy, a system run not by the sovereign will of the American people but by a secret cabal of sinister bureaucrats and uniformed martinets. Explicitly, Hollywood in the 1990s was more likely to deny the promise of American life than to affirm it. The paranoid style of filmmaking is epitomized by Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995), where the names of presidents announce not great man biopics but deranged psychodramas.

## III

Against the dark vision of contemporary America as a betrayer of its own principles, the best proof of the endurance of the democratic, egalitarian ethos in motion picture art remains the character of the man (it almost always is a man) at the center of the typical Hollywood narrative. Whether superspy or private detective, agent of the state or of his own agenda, he is a rugged individual who exudes a native disdain for authority and a ready kinship with the common folk. In the high-testosterone action-adventure blockbusters numbered by Roman numerals—the *Rocky, Rambo*, and *Lethal Weapon* cycles—he also acts out an interracial bond of American brotherhood. Whatever his race and occupation, the virile adventurer who takes no guff from the rich and powerful remains the favorite hero that "the American, this new

man" looks up to on screen: Clint Eastwood in the *Dirty Harry* series, Bruce Willis in the *Die Hard* series, Eddie Murphy in the *Beverly Hills Cop* series, etc., ad infinitum.

At the approach of the new millennium, as if looking back over the first full century of the moving image in order to relive its most dramatic tour of duty, Hollywood returned to the event that, in retrospect, served as its single most vital fount of democratic myth-making. Beginning with Steven Spielberg's brilliant, moving *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and cresting with Micheal Bay's boneheaded, tedious *Pearl Harbor* (2001), an extraordinary explosion of World War II-minded narratives cut across the precincts of American popular culture. From the programming of the History Channel to the top slots on the best seller lists, reverent paeans to what television anchorman and World War II chronicler Tom Brokaw dubbed "the greatest generation" proliferated, not least in the revival of the combat film genre. On a cultural level, the glance backward expressed the filial impulse of baby boomer sons to give one final salute to their World War II fathers fading away. On a technical level, the *fin de siecle* cycle of combat films was a tribute to the power of computer-generated images to render the spectacle and carnage of the battlefield persuasively and cost effectively on the big screen. Yet, whether set amid the beaches of Normandy (*Saving Private Ryan*, 1998), the jungles of a Pacific atoll (*The Thin Red Line*, 1998; *Windtalkers*, 2002), or for that matter the urban jungles of Somalia (*Black Hawk Down*, 2001) or the Central Highlands of Vietnam (*We Were Soldiers*, 2002), the new wave of combat films held true to the generic baseline of a multicultural brotherhood forged by conduct and courage, not color or class. In We Were Soldiers, the gruff but caring Col. Harold Moore (Mel Gibson) affirms the democratic ethos to his assembled troops before mustering out for the crucible of combat in Vietnam. "We're not leaving home," he tells them. "We're going to what home was always supposed to be."

## IV

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, another date which will live in infamy, the wartime background assumed added resonance and immediate relevance: the shock of awakening to a fiery conflagration, the celebration of the heroism of men in uniform, and the reaffirmation of the common values held by Americans All. American popular culture has absorbed and assimilated the tragedy via documentary specials, commemorative coins, and popular songs both meditative (Bruce Springsteen's "The Rising") and menacing (Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue [Angry American]"). To date, however, no big-budget Hollywood film or television Movie of the Week has dared to turn the red letter day into gripping action-adventure or heart-wrenching melodrama. Normally so eager to ride a trend and turn a buck, the docu-dramatists of screens small and large have observed a reverent moratorium on 9/11-themed scenarios.

Of course, in the case of Hollywood, the lengthy turnaround time for a major motion picture militates against its function as a punctual cultural bellwether. But though overt depictions

have been absent from the multiplex marquee, I know I am not alone in having filtered much of Hollywood cinema in 2002 through the smoke and rubble of the terrorist attacks.

In the immediate aftermath, the time lag between pre-9/11 production and post-9/11 release generated some spooky moments. Overnight, the appearance or disappearance of the World Trade Center became a sign of celluloid carbon dating. Ben Stiller's comedy *Zoolander* (released September 28, 2001) was roundly criticized for digitally erasing the Twin Towers in background shots while *Don't Say a Word*, a Manhattan-set thriller released the same day, retained the old skyline—and caused gasps from audiences jolted out of the fabula. Cameron Crowe's hallucinatory *Vanilla Sky* (December 14, 2001) also opted to retain the towers. "It was filmed about a year before the tragic incident that removed them," explained Crowe. "And I didn't want to remove them again." Whatever the strategy, the most conventional of motion picture images—the routine establishing shot of the New York City skyline—became a wrenching *memento mori*.

Likewise, standard-issue action-adventure fare sent out unexpected intimations of off-screen mortality. Caught in the backfire was Arnold Schwarzenegger's ill-titled *Collateral Damage*, originally scheduled for a September 2001 playdate and pushed back to February 8, 2002. As a Los Angeles fireman whose family is blown up by terrorists, Schwarzenegger personified a discomforting reversal of the actual statistics. "More than an embarrassment, it's an insult," snarled Variety.

Another terrorist-themed scenario was better plotted and better timed. The motion picture version of Tom Clancy's apocalyptic *The Sum of All Fears* (May 31, 2002) received a serendipitous blurb from Attorney General John Ashcroft, who on June 10th announced from Moscow that an Al Qaeda suspect had been detained for conspiring to smuggle a dirty bomb into the US. Already close to the bone, the film's plotline—the detonation of a nuclear device in Baltimore—gained added impact now that the doomsday fantasy seemed more like a geopolitical prophecy.[3] The next CIA-set thriller of that summer was equally in tune with its audience, though more for reasons of wishful thinking than dread expectation. Based on Robert Ludlum's 1980 novel, *The Bourne Identity* (released June 14, 2002) presented a touchingly anachronistic portrait of a ruthlessly efficient, all-knowing American intelligence apparatus, bustling with high-tech surveillance experts who can pinpoint the precise location of a single man anywhere on the planet.

As if Hollywood's early warning system had somehow detected the blips of a future *Zeitgeist,* a whole cycle of military-friendly films also emerged to catch the post-9/11 patriotic wave, notably *Behind Enemy Lines* (November 30, 2002), *Black Hawk Down* (December 28, 2001), and *We Were Soldiers* (March 1, 2002). All celebrated the duty-honor-country ethos of a uniformed brotherhood manning the guardposts for a clueless civilian culture. Significantly,

[3] I saw the film in a packed multiplex in Danvers, Massachusetts: as a cascade of very convincing computer graphics conjured a radioactive shockwave obliterating an American city, a stricken hush settled over the crowd. Later in the film, when a CIA operative slices the throat of a terrorist perpetrator, the same crowd cheered.

the most conspicuous box office failure in the war-minded cycle—John Woo's *Windtalkers* (June 14, 2002)—may have floundered on its anti-military hook: the plot hinges on marines killing fellow marines, not the enemy.

In terms of literal comic book fare, maybe it was just coincidence, but two of the most exuberant summertime blockbusters pivoted around heroes vanquishing nefarious creatures who fly around New York City and destroy its landmark architecture. In *Men in Black II* (July 4, 2002), the alien fifth column that invades the city is handily dispatched by a pair of secret agents protecting the earth from the scum of the universe. *Spider-Man* (May 3, 2002), another Manhattan-set fantasy and the biggest hit of 2002, contained the first patently premeditated post-9/11 moment, when a group of hardy New Yorkers pitches in to help Spidey save the heroine. "Attack one of us and you attack us all!" yells a voice from the crowd.

In future anniversaries of 9/11, we can expect more explicit reminders of the late reality to seep into American cinema—tentatively at first, via dialogue references and character backstory, but more brazenly as time and distance cauterizes the wound. Like December 7th, the other infamous date that 9/11 is often compared to, the countdown to zero hour will function as a kind of ticking time bomb in the motion picture narrative, a first act climax that blasts a sleeping nation out of its blithe complacency. Eventually, inevitably, Hollywood will then take us into the stairways of the Twin Towers, the corridors of the Pentagon, and the cabin of Flight 93. For the time being, however, even for a reputably cynical industry and its allegedly jaded audience, some obvious high concepts remain too awful to contemplate.

Among a cascade of images and narratives that express the American myth of democracy and equality, one scene can serve as an archetypal representation: the breathless montage in Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Mouth agape and teary-eyed, the young and idealistic Sen. Jefferson Smith (Jimmy Stewart) takes a tour of the capital. The secular shrines swirl around him, patriotic music trumpets on the soundtrack, and phrases on parchment flash across the screen as if written by the hand of God. Before the altar of democracy at the Lincoln Memorial, Smith shares a reverent moment with some fellow American acolytes: a dignified old black man, come to pay homage to the Great Emancipator, and a Jewish refugee, smiling as his grandson reads the words emblazoned on the wall, dedicated—like so much of Hollywood cinema—to the proposition that all men are created equal.

**Fig. 1: The Pearl Harbor Moment:**
**A Newsreel Shot of "Battleship Row" on the Morning of December 7, 1941.**

**Fig. 2: Americans All I:**
**A Multi-ethnic Crew Stays Afloat in Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat*, 1944.**

**Fig. 3: Americans All II:**
**One of the Many Multi-ethnic Portraits in the Advertising Council's**
**"I Am an American" Public Service Announcement Released in the Wake of 9/11.**
**Courtesy of the Advertising Council.**


**Fig. 4: The 9/11 Moment:**
**The Twin Towers at the World Trade Center on the Morning of September 11, 2001,**
**06 Sept. 2004 <www.abouttwintowers.info/911.htm>.**